STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI

Re: *Structure and Practices of the Video Relay Service Program*, CG Docket No. 10-51; *Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities*, CG Docket No. 03-123

In the finals of the 1964 NCAA Men's National Basketball Championship, Duke lost to UCLA, 98-83. Duke's defeat is one point in 1964's favor. Another is that AT&T introduced the first videophone (trademarked as the "Picturephone") to the public at the New York World's Fair. In a demonstration of the new device, two deaf users in two different cities were able to communicate freely with each other. The Picturephone was a commercial flop, but it laid the groundwork for what we now call video relay service, or VRS.

VRS has been critical to providing deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals with the ability to communicate in ways that many of us take for granted, such as making a phone call to order a pizza. But as beneficial as this service has been, we can do better. So I'm thrilled that today, we take steps to meaningfully improve VRS. A couple of them deserve special mention.

First, we are authorizing a voluntary, eight-month trial of skills-based routing of calls. Here's why this matters. When someone who is deaf or hard of hearing has a matter that requires some technical language to explain—say, a medical problem or a computer support issue—he or she can't necessarily be sure that a VRS interpreter will know all the relevant terms, or how best to translate them. With skills-based routing, interpreters who specialize in medical, legal, and technical computer support terminology can enable those with disabilities to use VRS to communicate with doctors, lawyers, and computer technicians. I called for the Commission to implement a pilot project involving skills-based routing almost four years ago, and I'm happy that it is finally coming to fruition.

Second, we are approving a trial for deaf interpreters. Deaf interpreters can help when a deaf or hard of hearing person with cognitive or mobility challenges, or limited English or American Sign Language (ASL) proficiency, has difficulty communicating with a hearing person, even a person proficient in ASL. A deaf interpreter's unique experience and background can help bridge this communications gap—almost like switching from a static-filled line to a clear one. Together, these two trials will further Congress's goal of achieving functional equivalence of communications services, while also providing the Commission with valuable data to inform potential future action on these issues.

Additionally, we ask the public to weigh in on many issues important to the future of VRS. For example, we hope to evaluate what performance goals and quality service metrics can improve the VRS program's effectiveness. We also propose another four-year VRS compensation rate plan and seek comment on how to structure that plan to promote competition and fiscal responsibility.

We've come a long way since the Picturephone. I'm optimistic that our action today will help us go a long way further. I look forward to working with my colleagues on further steps to ensure that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are provided with functionally equivalent communications services—or, in English, are brought over to the right side of the digital divide.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff for all the hard work on this comprehensive and critical matter: Robert Aldrich, Susan Bahr, Eliot Greenwald, Alison Kutler, Karen Peltz Strauss, and Michael Scott from the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; Terry Cavanaugh from the Office of General Counsel; David Schmidt and Dana Shaffer of the Office of Managing Director; and Henning Schulzrinne from the Office of Strategic Policy and Planning. It will be no small thing to walk into this building

tomorrow morning knowing that you've helped those whose world is silent better communicate, if not communicate *period*, with the outside world.